

Pneumococcal Disease (includes pneumococcal pneumonia, pneumococcal meningitis and pneumococcal bacteremia)

What is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, also called pneumococcus. It may cause pneumonia, meningitis or a blood stream infection (bacteremia).

Who gets pneumococcal disease?

Although anyone can get pneumococcal disease, it occurs more frequently in infants, young children, African Americans, some Native American populations, the elderly or in people with serious underlying medical conditions such as chronic lung, heart or kidney disease. Others at risk include alcoholics, diabetics, people with weakened immune systems and those without a spleen.

How is the disease transmitted?

The pneumococcus is spread by airborne or direct exposure to respiratory droplets from a person who is infected or carrying the bacteria?

When does pneumococcal disease occur?

Infections occur most often during the winter and early spring when respiratory illnesses are more common.

How soon after exposure do symptoms occur?

The incubation period may vary but it is generally one to three days.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms generally include an abrupt onset of fever and shaking or chills. Other common symptoms may include headache, cough, chest pain, disorientation, shortness of breath, weakness and occasionally a stiff neck.

How is pneumococcal disease diagnosed?

Doctors are able to diagnose pneumococcal disease based on the type of symptoms exhibited by the patient and specific laboratory cultures of sputum, blood or spinal fluid.

How is it treated?

Prompt treatment with antibiotics, such as penicillin or cephalosporin, is usually effective. However, penicillin-resistant strains of pneumococcus are increasingly being reported throughout the United States.

Is there a vaccine to prevent infection?

Yes. There are two types of vaccines currently in use, one of which is approved for children less than two years of age. Both vaccines are safe and reduce disease occurrence. Pneumococcal conjugate vaccine is recommended for all children less than 24 months old and for children between 24 and 59 months old who are at high risk of disease. Older children and adults with risk factors may receive the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine. Patients in high-risk categories should ask their health care provider or local health department about pneumococcal vaccine.

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